‘Forgotten Lore’: Can the Socratic method of teaching be used to reduce the attainment gap of black, Asian and minority ethnic students?

Dan Berger[1] and Charles Wild[2]
[1]University of East London, UK [2]University of Hertfordshire, UK

Teaching standards within the UK’s higher education sector are under unprecedented scrutiny not only in terms of perceived ‘highly variable’ standards of teaching but also in relation to the clear attainment gap between black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students and their white counterparts. Gentle taps at the door to the higher education sector, which have highlighted both the inequality of educational experience and the need for reform, have been largely ignored leading, ultimately, to the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The authors suggest that in much the same way that Edger Allen Poe’s slumbering scholar revisits ‘forgotten lore’, so too the time has come for higher education institutions to fundamentally rethink the way in which curriculum delivery should take place for the benefit of all students. Consequently, the authors assert that the proper and effective implementation of the classical Socratic Method could provide a viable response to the TEF’s call of “Nevermore”.

Keywords: BAME students, attainment gap, Teaching Excellence Framework, Socratic Method, critical thinking, extra and co-curricular activities

Introduction

Teaching standards in UK higher education institutions are under unprecedented scrutiny. Following the Minister for Universities and Science’s rather scathing observation at the Universities UK 2015

Annual Conference that the quality of university teaching is not only 'highly variable' but that 'there is lamentable teaching that must be driven out of our system' (Johnson, 2015), the government has pressed ahead with the introduction of a teaching excellence framework (TEF), currently outlined in the 2016 White Paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016). Under this system, universities will be required to publish the gender, ethnicity and social backgrounds of their student intake, and will be assessed, and possibly allowed to raise tuition fee rates, according to their institutional performance on student satisfaction, retention and graduate employment rates.

Whilst this may appear encouraging for future students in UK higher education, current studies highlight the fact that black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students remain at risk of receiving a substandard educational experience while at university, and a substandard chance of being employed once they have graduated. A number of reasons have been cited for this 'attainment gap', but may be broadly listed under three main headings highlighted by a joint report from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Equality Challenge Unit (ECU):

- 'Differences between BME students and white students appear to relate to both rate of retention/withdrawal and achievement', and that 'much of the institutional work to address differential retention and achievement "is at an early stage"' (Berry and Loke, 2011: 11);
- 'The National Student Survey (NSS) shows that BME students, on average, are less satisfied with their student experience than their white peers' (Berry and Loke, 2011: 12); and
- 'Ethnic minority graduates do comparatively worse in the labour market than white graduates in securing full-time employment, particularly on graduation' (Berry and Loke, 2011: 12).

The fact that the TEF will focus on student achievement, satisfaction and employability, amongst a range of other metrics, will certainly prove useful to those seeking greater transparency of information in these areas. However, as the authors have noted previously (Berger and Wild, 2016a), any data set is only truly useful when it is placed into context via the TEF's qualitative element; an institutional narrative outlining the overall educational mission of the University in question. Equally, if taken in isolation, individual sources of information risk over-simplifying, or even overlooking, the complex inter-relationships at

work within complex systems such as the educational process. More specifically, data is only the starting point. Collation of information, either centrally by the government or locally by individual institutions, will not enhance the educational experience of students. Similarly, a multitude of reports commenting on data will not impact on a student's educational experience unless, as academics, we act upon the warnings that we are currently being given. In this regard, the authors suggest that the higher education sector may be likened to the slumbering scholar in Edgar Allen Poe's (1845) *The Raven*:

> 'Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
> Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore, –
> While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
> As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.'

There is, undeniably, a huge amount of data and information available to universities regarding their student cohorts, accompanied by an almost endless list of priorities, ranging from concerns over widening participation and the achievement of male and female students, through to more specific concerns relating to both black and white male students. However, these have simply been gentle taps at the door to the higher education sector. Gentle taps that have grown in significance and intensity over recent years, demanding the attention of higher education institutions and highlighting the fact that there are students who still do not receive the same educational experience as their peers:

> 'Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before.
> "Surely," said I, "surely that is something at my window lattice;
> Let me see, then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore;
> Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore:"'

The National Union of Students (NUS, 2009: 3) noted that 'Black students are less likely to be satisfied with their educational experience and to attain first-class degrees in comparison to their White peers', going on to observe that: 'a simple explanation for the attainment and satisfaction gap of Black students does not exist'. At the time, the NUS tabled a number of proposals which emphasised pastoral measures and included increasing 'Black representation in role models and staff', 'providing encouragement and care'; as well as providing 'increased academic support' (NUS, 2009: 29-30). However, as Berry and Loke (2011: 11) observe, 'the most popular type of intervention beyond data collection and analysis seems to be mentoring and the creation of role

models'. This does not mean that such initiatives fail to impact positively on BAME students, but it does suggest that a more thoughtful approach is needed. In this regard, the authors believe that the emphasis must be placed on the educational mission of universities and, more specifically, on curriculum delivery so as to actively engage all students during their studies.

Indeed, the NUS (2009) reported that a significant minority of BAME students viewed their teaching and learning environment negatively, often speaking of alienation, exclusion and feeling invisible to lecturers, with 23 per cent describing it as 'cliquey', 17 per cent as 'isolating', 8 per cent as 'hostile' and 7 per cent as 'racist'. Many of these feelings spawned from inside the classroom. Berry and Loke (2011: 40) also noted that when looking at the learning experiences of BAME students, institutions should include the possible value of:

- 'student-centred, collaborative teaching;
- recognising the prior knowledge and experiences of BME students (and the avoidance of preconceived notions about them);
- paying attention to classroom dynamics – allowing BME students a voice (especially when in a minority);
- avoiding technology that disadvantages students from certain backgrounds (e.g. by class or ethnicity);
- using learning spaces known to be favoured/appropriate to BME students; and
- skills development for teaching staff – including development of "emotional capital" (Cousin, 2006).'

The authors argue that despite these gentle taps, few sector-wide initiatives have been undertaken so as to address the concerns highlighted by both the NUS and HEA/ECU over six years ago. One local case study which the authors (Berger and Wild, 2016b) have examined is the use of a refined flipped-classroom model across an entire undergraduate programme which not only resulted in a significant reduction in the BAME attainment gap, but resulted in the lowest differential across the entire university. However, we have reached the stage where continuing concerns as to the overall quality of education within universities has obliged the government to go beyond gentle taps at the sector's door, and to enter the room so as to raise the slumbering scholar into action:

> 'In there stepped a stately Raven, of the saintly days of yore.
> Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he,

But, with mein of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door,
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door.'

In this regard, the authors suggest that the new TEF framework and image of the Raven are closely aligned. Within the poem, the Raven is used to represent a non-reasoning creature that simply repeats the word 'Nevermore'. At a fundamental level, the Raven may be seen to represent the government's stance that teaching of highly variable quality will no longer be tolerated. It may also be seen to suggest that significant variations in student experience will no longer be accepted within the higher education sector. However, the authors suggest that the analogy may also be seen to signify the potential dangers associated with any framework (Berger and Wild 2016a), in that the non-reasoning quantitative element of the TEF (the Raven) needs to be balanced by the perceived wisdom of the qualitative element (the bust of Pallas) in order to secure sector-wide confidence in the new framework. Finally, given the fact that the quality of education within higher education institutions is under greater scrutiny than ever before, the authors suggest that in much the same way that Poe's scholar revisits 'forgotten lore', so too the time has come for higher education institutions to fundamentally rethink the way in which curriculum delivery should take place for the benefit of all students. In this respect, the authors assert that the proper and effective implementation of the classical Socratic Method could provide a viable response to the TEF's call of 'Nevermore'.

Forgotten lore? – The Socratic Method

The 'Socratic Method', named after the classical Greek philosopher Socrates 469-399 BCE – 'the father of Western philosophy' (Tweed and Lehman, 2003) – is a form of co-operative argumentative dialogue between individuals, based on challenging and subsequently defending an intellectual, possibly hypothetical, position, with the express intention of stimulating critical thinking and drawing out an individual's ideas, underlying false presumptions and beliefs.

Socrates claimed that learning, and thus knowledge, progressed through his own, and others', questioning of held beliefs, hence the term 'Socratic questioning' (Trahar, 2007). The purpose of the process is to use logic and persuasion in order to deconstruct the defender's argument in a bid to lead that individual to contradiction in some way, thus weakening the defender's point, or as Elizabeth Garrett (1998: 201) puts it in relation to a legal context: 'The goal is to learn how to analyze legal problems, to reason by analogy, to think critically about one's own

arguments and those put forth by others'. Since the Socratic Method is a method of hypothesis elimination, better hypotheses are found by steadily identifying and eliminating those that have led, via the process, to contradictions. In this regard, Vlastos (1983) outlines the stages involved:

1. Socrates' interlocutor asserts a thesis, for example 'Courage is endurance of the soul', which Socrates considers false and targets for refutation.
2. Socrates secures his interlocutor's agreement to further premises, for example 'Courage is a fine thing' and 'Ignorant endurance is not a fine thing'.
3. Socrates then argues, and the interlocutor agrees, that these further premises imply the contrary of the original thesis; in this case, it leads to: 'courage is not endurance of the soul'.
4. Socrates then claims that he has shown that his interlocutor's thesis is false and that its negation is true.

The method is most commonly adopted in US Law Schools, such as at the University of Chicago, as a means of enabling teachers and students to work together so as to understand an issue more completely. At the start of the century, Watson (2001) conducted a series of interviews with law students enquiring as to their experiences, and views, of their law degree programmes. The main findings included the fact that first year students found their studies terrifying, and that 'some teachers deliberately set out to intimidate students'. Watson (2001: 91) goes on to note that students

> 'floundered, having no understanding, even after hours of study, of what was expected. The teachers' practice of "hiding the ball" was a poor way of imparting knowledge or expertise, and the students did not believe, despite what they had been told, that they were being taught to "think like lawyers" [...] More than one claimed it was the worst year of their lives.'

This has led a number of commentators such as Stone (1971: 407) to characterize the Socratic Method as 'infantilising, demeaning, dehumanising, and sadistic, a tactic for promoting hostility and competition among students, self-serving, and destructive of positive ideological values.'

However, before dismissing the Socratic Method as being an outmoded and dehumanising technique, it is necessary to question

whether those professing to use this teaching strategy within the classroom are, in fact, practising what they preach. In other words, the authors suggest that the criticisms noted during Watson's study were directed at a derivative of the Socratic Method as opposed to the actual practice of Socratic learning. Paul and Elder (1997: np) describe the Socratic Method as the most powerful, teaching tactic for fostering critical thinking and go on to note:

> 'We can question goals and purposes. We can probe into the nature of the question, problem, or issue that is on the floor. We can inquire into whether or not we have relevant data and information. We can consider alternative interpretations of the data and information. We can analyze key concepts and ideas. We can question assumptions being made. We can ask students to trace out the implications and consequences of what they are saying. We can consider alternative points of view. All of these, and more, are the proper focus of the Socratic questioner.'

In effect, the lecturer should act as the logical equivalent of the inner critical voice which a student's mind should develop when s/he develops critical thinking abilities. Socratic inquiries consist of a series of challenging and then defending arguments which, require 'participants to articulate, develop and defend positions that may at first be imperfectly defined intuitions' (Garrett, 1998: 201), and that, typically, end in a state of puzzlement known as *aporia*. As such, the lecturer is positioned not so much as an expert, but as someone who facilitates an 'intrapersonal' learning process whereby 'each person must find the 'truth' within her/himself' (Trahar, 2007: 12). As Paul and Elder (1997: np) observe, 'the contributions from the members of the class are like so many thoughts in the mind […] the Socratic questioner forces the class to think […] while yet continually aiding the students by posing facilitating questions.' It is the search for this subjective 'truth' which sits at the heart of a student's critical reasoning.

In the majority of instances, the process which lecturers refer to as being the Socratic Method is not the same as that described in Plato's dialogues. The reason for this is that many lecturers are, necessarily, grounded in specific subject matter, whether it is law, medicine or economics; which they feel their students need to learn and, ultimately, know. The authors do not suggest that there is anything wrong with this approach, simply that it is not the Socratic Method, as it introduces a subject-specific element with the ultimate goal of ensuring that students confirm that they 'know the answer'. It seeks to provide students with

specific knowledge and the ability to talk to others within that particular discipline about it.

The Socratic Method transcends subject matter as it seeks understanding through deep questioning; the questioner as the unknowing bystander. In other words, the Socratic Method may be likened to an advanced form of the child continuously asking 'why?' As it is not restricted to one particular field or topic, it is extremely difficult to use in the classroom with any true success, especially within a sector that is focused on specific educational goals ('by the end of this class you will understand X or Y') and in measuring a student's knowledge at pre-determined intervals via paper-based assessments. Ultimately, the Socratic Method requires a lecturer to be prepared to go 'off topic', to leave behind a tutorial plan or restrictive curriculum, and to embrace the fact that the answer is less important that the logical reasoning or the process of critical thinking being developed by their students.

Consequently, when a lecturer poses discussion based questions, s/he is directing the conversation towards a particular topic. The goal is, quite clearly, to teach students about X or Y. It is about teaching students something practical that has a defensible connection to future employment, as opposed to the development of 'wicked' skills such as critical thinking. Furthermore, whether conscious of otherwise, the goal is to teach students how to see the world from a certain perspective, thus reinforcing the lecturer's, or institution's, understanding of what it is to be a lawyer, physician or economist.

Jones (2015: 58) identifies the limitations in the 'traditional' (doctrinal) legal educational approach:

> 'The pedagogy traditionally used by law schools in undergraduate law degrees has involved a focus on developing a particular form of analytical thought process in students, to encourage "thinking like a lawyer" […] This term does not necessarily imply a vocational purpose to its use; instead it encapsulates the process of doctrinal analysis that has been traditionally celebrated within both law and legal education. It revolves around what it deems to be a rational, dispassionate, objective assessment of material facts.'

Jones then states that instead of using a 'one size fits all' approach, which does little to encourage critical reasoning – nor does it recognise individual students' diverse backgrounds and/or intellectual strengths – that there should be recognition of 'multiple intelligences'. Multiple

intelligences can identify the fundamental capacities present in each individual student. Adjusting teaching and learning methodologies to ensure that the breadth of capacities is acknowledged and enhanced enables multiple intelligences to be used as a tool to generate, what Davis and Francois (2005) call 'intellectual versatility' within each student. Barrington (2004) argues that multiple intelligences offer an 'inclusive pedagogy' which allows students to work to their own strengths, which Craft (2009: 192) upholds by recognising that the theory offers an opportunity to find 'rich patterns of competence and expertise in each learner'. The authors, in this paper, argue that the Socratic method of delivery supports the multiple intelligence theory.

Critical reasoning

Turning to the notion of 'critical reasoning', this refers to the process of constructing unique answers, supported by authority (Berger and Wild, 2015). It is the ability to recognise and identify key issues, and then solve problems using logic, common sense, experience and knowledge. It will be an opinion based on an appreciation of the 'best' thinking – both subjectively and objectively derived – available. By the term 'subjectively' derived, the authors refer to the fact that the student must derive their own hypothesis from their own derived thought processes. Equally, by 'objectively' derived, the authors refer to the fact that the answer must have legitimate force from external authority, or 'authority without an author' (Van Roermund, 2000). The combination of these two elements allows a student to deliver a unique answer with either the support, or criticism, of the best thinkers in any particular field. Of course, these states are not mutually exclusive. External knowledge necessarily informs a person's inner beliefs. Equally, even the most extensive evidence requires a 'leap of faith' on the part of an individual to enable them to accept that even the most empirical of data is true. However, a student should be encouraged to embrace these two paradigms in equal measure. There are no definitively 'right' answers in academic problem scenarios, as in real life, but that it is the ongoing attempt at the construction of logically sound arguments, supported by authority, which provides 'good' answers (Dworkin, 1978). More importantly, a graduate is employed for their ability to think critically in the workplace, not simply for their ability to regurgitate knowledge.

The wisdom of Pallas – contrasting methods of teaching

The statutory national curriculum for Key Stages 3 and 4 within English schools states, as its main aim, that 'the national curriculum provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge that they need to

be educated citizens. It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said; and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement' (Department for Education, 2013: 6). In essence, critical reasoning is not a skill expected of school pupils, but it is nevertheless expected of university graduates. The Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA, 2015: 7) recommendations for law, for example, is that a law graduate's attributes, should include the 'ability to produce a synthesis of relevant doctrinal and policy issues, presentations of a reasoned choice between alternative solutions and critical judgment of the merits of particular arguments'. The question arises as to how this transition to be achieved, from a pupil who must merely 'engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement' to that of a student who is able to make a 'critical judgement of the merits of particular arguments'?

In this regard, the authors assert that the transition from school pupil to university graduate cannot be guaranteed unless teaching methods, which actively prescribe the enhancement of critical reasoning, are widely adopted. In other words, a conscious shift in focus away from telling students what to think, towards that of how to think. Indeed, as Trahar (2007: 13) notes, 'those who favour these approaches to learning are often critical of more formal learning, (such as the traditional lecture in higher education) and rote learning, believing that such practices constitute a "*surface*" rather than a "*deep*" (Marton and Saljo, 1984) approach'.

War of Words

To this end, the authors created a university-wide extra and co-curricular course (ECCA) – War of Words (WoW) – at the start of the 2015/16 academic year which utilises the Socratic Method of delivery. At the end of the course, participants were asked to provide information regarding their demographic background, their reasons for participating in the ECCA and their experiences of participation, together with their hopes for future involvement. The results of the survey demonstrated overwhelming support from students for the implementation of the Socratic Method. Furthermore, the data highlighted that the percentage of BAME student participants on the ECCA (92 percent of respondents) was significantly higher than the University of Hertfordshire's overall proportion of undergraduate BAME students at 48 percent (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2014). In the light of these data, the authors argue that ECCAs have not only proved extremely popular with undergraduate students (Berger and Wild, 2016c), but that the Socratic Method used within this specific course has been shown to be of particular interest to BAME students. This is, seemingly, at odds with

the findings of Purcell *et al*. (2012) and Pennington *et al*. (2013), who have established that under-represented groups are less likely to participate in extra-curricular activities. Therefore, the authors assert that it may be something about the Socratic method of teaching which is attractive to BAME students, rather than that this group is merely interested in engaging in the ECCA. The question is, why?

Trahar (2007) ventures the fact that the collective nature of the Socratic Method is mirrored in a range of cultures across the globe that supports communal learning techniques. For example, 'in Chinese cultures there is a high level of collectivism [...] and a preference for working together in groups to solve problems' (Trahar, 207: 13) and is due, at least in part, to the fact that issues are addressed in their broad context, considering 'a host of factors that operate in relation to one another' (Nisbett, 2003: xvi) as opposed to the traditional European approach which focuses on categorisation and straightforward rules. Indeed, as Shih (1919: 283) observes, 'in the Confucian human-centered philosophy man [sic] cannot exist alone; all action must be in the form of interaction between man and man.' Alongside this, Heine *et al*. (2001) noted that Japanese students tended to work longer on tasks in which they failed as it was seen as an opportunity for self-improvement, as opposed to Canadian students who focused on tasks in which they had succeeded. In other words, feedback which identifies weaknesses, either in performance or in the quality of an argument, is not only perceived quite differently between different ethnic groupings, as per Heine *et al*.'s study, but also results in different behavioural patterns. In Africa, 'knowledge is transmitted orally from one generation to another and by practical example; learning through experience, therefore, predominates' (Trahar 2007: 14). However, this does not explain fully the significant uptake highlighted by the authors within this case study, but simply highlights the fact that collective learning may be seen within many cultures.

The authors also took the opportunity to examine whether there is a correlation between student participation in ECCAs which implement the Socratic Method and enhancement of their academic performance on their degree programmes. The data collected indicates that there is indeed a correlation which, the authors posit, could, when taken in conjunction with the high uptake of BAME students, offer a viable strategy for universities to close the 'attainment gap'.

The BAME attainment gap

The number of BAME students entering higher education are on the rise, yet the proportion of students who achieve first or upper second class degrees (approximately 62 percent of all enrolled students at the

authors' institution in 2014/15[1]) is highest amongst white students compared to all other ethnic groups (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2014a). In addition, the NSS – conducted externally to final year undergraduate students and recognised as the gauge for the 'student satisfaction' element of the various national university rankings systems – data for 2013 show BAME students are less likely than white students to be satisfied with their HE courses (HEFCE, 2014b). Therefore, it is arguable that lower satisfaction leads to lower engagement, thereby leading to lower attainment.

Module failures

At the authors' own institution, the module failure rates at university level illustrate the differences in performance between the main ethnic groups (i.e. Asian, Black, Chinese and White) and the fact that there has been little change in these performance rates over the past three years. Table 1 outlines these data for three academic years, whilst Table 2 outlines the Law School specific data for the same period.

TABLE 1

Summary of University-level module failure rates

	Module failure rates (Level 4-7)		
	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Asian	10%	11%	10%
Black	14%	16%	14%
Chinese	10%	8%	8%
White	6%	7%	7%

TABLE 2

Summary of School-level module failure rates

	Module failure rates (Level 4-7)		
	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Asian	-	13%	10%
Black	-	15%	13%
Chinese	-	4%	2%
White	-	10%	8%

[1] Data provided by Academic Registry.

It is interesting to note that whilst data over this three year period have remained relatively unchanged, the School appears to have slightly lower failure rates for Black students, and significantly lower failure rates for Chinese students when compared with University-wide data. It is also interesting to note that the School's White students perform slightly lower than the University average over the same period.

'Good' honours degrees

As far as awards are concerned, the number of White students receiving a 'good' honours degree (first or upper second class) during the 2014/15 academic year is far higher than that of any other demographic – 75 percent, compared with 45 percent for Black students, 55 percent for Chinese students and 63 percent for Asian students. When this is compared to the School-level data, it may be noted that 75 percent of White students achieve a 'good' honours degree, compared with 69 percent of Black students, 75 percent of Asian students and 100 percent of Chinese students. Consequently, if we use White students as a benchmark for performance, it may be seen that the achievement of all of the main ethnic groups is significantly higher than the overall University average. Most significantly though, Asian and Chinese students are either performing on a par with, or at a better level than, White students. Equally, whilst the performance of Black students is still lower than that of White students by 6 percent, it is still significantly higher than the University wide achievement gap of 20 percent. This data shows a clear correlation between the use and implementation of the Socratic Method of curriculum delivery, and an increase in the attainment of good honours degrees amongst BAME students.

There has been much academic study to investigate and report on why this attainment gap exists, and these studies have largely grouped causation into internal and external factors, which then leads naturally and logically into a discussion about the provision made to all students (regardless of demography) to analyse whether there is an inherent lack of understanding, effort or motivation from higher education institutions (HEIs), and the larger educational framework in which they operate, to address the problems which has led to this gap forming

(1) External factors

Various external factors have been attributed to explain causation of this attainment gap. Mountford-Zimdars *et al*. (2015:10) state that: 'Prior attainment has been shown to be the biggest factor in getting the highest outcomes (there is an increase in the percentage of the students who achieve better outcomes corresponding with an increase in their tariff

scores on entry to HE)', although to investigate whether HE institutional effects play a significant role in widening the gap, HEFCE's approach has generally been to focus on different cohorts with similar further education characteristics, such as A level results. Once the cohort has been controlled, a further external factor to be taken into account is the socio-demographic characteristic of the cohort, compared with the provider, since as Mountford-Zimdars *et al*. (2015: 10) argue, drawing on Gorard (2009), 'social stratification within education providers has long been established as increasing the disparity between pupils' outcomes without increasing overall attainment.'

(2) Internal factors (institutional effects)

Mountford-Zimdars *et al*. (2015) propose that an interplay between three layers of interaction may be to blame: *Macro* – for example, social and cultural factors embedded in the global environment within which HEIs operate; *Meso* – within the HEI itself, which form the social context within which student outcomes are produced; and *Micro* – in terms of the personal interaction between students and staff within the HEI. Arguably, at the very centre of this tripartite interplay, are curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment strategies set by these HEIs. After all, regardless of other, somewhat ancillary (albeit important) aims – such as the provision of identifiable and relatable role models – the creation of curricula, and the setting of assessments correlating to those curricula, are the key constant required of all providers.

(3) Curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment strategies

It is widely documented that curricula, learning, teaching and assessment practices impact significantly on student engagement and experiences (Crozier and Reay 2008; David *et al*., 2009; Roberts, 2011; Burke *et al*., 2013) and ultimately outcomes. Mountford-Zimdars *et al*. (2015) make a crucial observation as regards 'targeted intervention' (supposedly designed to eradicate bias against whole demographies), which they say may create a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' by reinforcing stereotypes. They, in fact, prefer an 'inclusive' approach which the authors wholeheartedly support:

> 'There is some caution about targeted interventions among some in the sector for fear that they may reinforce a model of student deficit. The notion of a 'post-racial' pedagogy was supported by some of the institutions we visited. The basis of this approach is to avoid labelling people (acknowledging that notions of diversity

> should not be restricted to particular issues such as ethnicity, faith or immigration status). A post-racial approach acknowledges a broad meaning of diversity and positively values all students' social and cultural capital, rather than requiring them to adapt to a dominant ideal. Overall, a positive trend was observed in the research of a move from approaches that aim at 'integration' of non-traditional students towards a broader concept of 'inclusive' HE' (Mountford-Zimdars *et al*., 2015: 55-56)

This inclusive approach must treat the student cohort as equals within a single class, but, at the same time, recognise individual variations within this class. It is this striking of a difficult balance, which the authors say must be achieved if HEIs are to close this BAME attainment gap. For this reason, the authors' assert that the Socratic method of learning and teaching – an ancient, confrontational, means of eliciting critical reasoning from individuals in a group setting – together with a formative-rich assessment strategy, works so well in many curricula. While the external and internal factors listed above are of vital importance, the remit of this paper is to focus on curriculum delivery, which the authors assert will mitigate against – although possibly not eradicate altogether – the combined effect of these other factors.

This method of delivery has many benefits. Prior attainment will not be a factor where rote-learning may have contributed to an individual's previous academic successes. The use of pure critical reasoning – ultimately derived qualitatively from the student's unique view of the world – transcends, and possibly even trumps, a student's rigorous but uninspiring (and over-assessed) school and further education experience. Socio-cultural characteristics should be treated as enriching a diverse session, with the championing of divergent views seeking to add depth and perspective to in-class debates. Further, the interplay between macro, meso and micro level problems in HEIs, which Mountford-Zimdars et al say causes the gap, would be naturally mitigated against, as long as institutions, and the staff within them, clearly understand how to deliver the teaching sessions, know what the learning outcomes are meant to achieve, and appreciate how to assess consistently, fairly and objectively – particularly as the Socratic method requires a vital element of subjectivity from the student. While the authors appreciate that some may argue that this is a tall order, the opportunity to address issues at macro, meso and micro level, using traditional techniques, has been available for many years without much success – so perhaps this is the time to try something very old and largely ignored, in order to deal with a fairly recently recognised problem?

Nevermore – addressing the call for teaching excellence

The 'WoW' format

WoW places individual students in front of a large audience (normally 150-200 per session) of student judges to argue a one minute defence of a controversial topical position, such as 'The UK should abolish its monarchy' or that 'Breastfeeding in public is unacceptable'. A student volunteers for the position by commenting 'I volunteer' on a blogpost which advertises a number of positions per session, and the position and student are paired-up at random. The student will then usually have two to three days to prepare their argument.

On the day of the WoW, the student presents their one minute defence from the front of the lecture theatre, in complete silence from the audience. Once they have finished, the student is then subjected to questions from the audience, who have prepared impromptu responses while the speaker is presenting, all of which are designed to throw the candidate off-balance and to test the student's preparation, critical reasoning skills and, ultimately, their resolve. After approximately ten minutes of questioning from the audience, the Chairperson calls a halt to proceedings and asks the audience for feedback on the candidate's performance on the following grading criteria; (i) content – what the candidate argues initially and subsequently in response to questions; (ii) presentation – how the candidate presents the argument and how persuasive they are; (iii) popularity – the public vote. The judge's decision will be based on (a) his/her own assessment of the candidate; (b) the feedback on the first two grading criteria; and (c) on the public vote outcome – (a)-(c) are weighted equally.

Candidate students are discouraged from using statistics or empirical 'facts' in their arguments, which are hard to verify in the room on the day, and are not determinative in any case. Students should attempt to use subjective 'everyday' analogies to make their points and successful students tend to seek to use gently persuasive verbal and body language, rather than aggressive rhetoric. At the end of the academic year, the students with the largest number of successful defences throughout the year, will enter a knockout competition of a number of stages, culminating in a Grand Final of six students. The academic year 2015-16 featured twenty WoW sessions.

In the final session prior to the Grand Final, the gathered participants were given a questionnaire to complete, which sought to collect data relating to: (a) the participant; (b) the participant's experiences of WoW; and (c) any hopes the participant may have of seeing WoW-style teaching embedded into their academic course curriculum delivery. A total of 187 viable responses were recorded, indexed and then coded as

to identify emerging patterns and themes. The data was then analysed in an iterative manner and translated into useable information.

Analysis of the data gathered

Of the 187 participants, 57 percent were female and 43 percent male, with 95 percent of those completing the questionnaire being undergraduate students, 2 percent were postgraduate students and the remaining 3 percent self-identified as 'other', including academics and members of the students' union.

Of the undergraduate student participants in the questionnaire, 54 percent were in their 1st year of study, 24 percent in their final year of study, and 22 percent of respondents self-identified as 'other', including 2nd year of study. In terms of subject-disciplines 48 percent of the undergraduate students were from the School of Law, Criminology and Political Science, 17 percent from the Business School, 8 percent from Education, 7 percent from the School of Humanities, 5 percent from Physics, Astronomy and Maths, 5 percent from the School of Computer Science, 3 percent from Life and Medical Sciences, 3 percent from Creative Arts, 2 percent from the School of Engineering and Technology and 2 percent from Health and Social Work.

It should be noted that the supervising lecturer for WoW was from the University's School of Law, Criminology and Political Science and, as such, a great deal of the promotional activity for this ECCA during 2015/16 was through the School's portals and social media platforms and, as such, should be borne in mind when considering the participation bias in favour of law, criminology and political science students.

Turning to the ethnicity of the 187 student participants, 8 percent, of student self-identified as White UK or White other, 38 percent as Asian UK or Asian, 46 percent of students were Black UK or Black/African/Caribbean, and 6 percent classified themselves as Mixed race/Multiple ethnicity, with 2 percent choosing 'Other' for their ethnicity. When this profile is compared to other ECCAs offered to students which included Debating, Mediation and Mooting, then the overall BAME participation rate for these courses was 83 percent of all participants. If the specific data relating to WoW is discounted (i.e. 92 percent), the remaining BAME participation rate for the other ECCAs during the 2015/16 academic year was 72 percent. Whilst this still represents a considerable proportion of student participants, it is nevertheless 20 percent lower than the BAME participation rate for WoW.

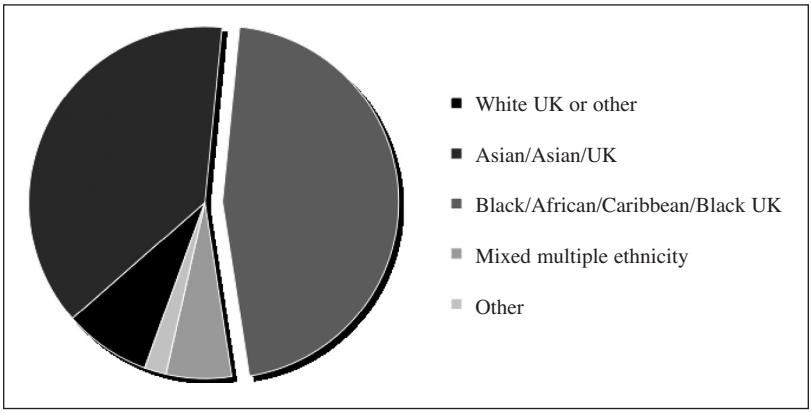

FIGURE 1
Ethnicity of student participants

Eighteen percent of the 187 participants had attended 1-3 sessions of the twenty available during the 2015/16 academic year; 28 percent had attended between 4-6 sessions, with 35 percent having attended 7-9 sessions. It was noted that 19 percent of the questionnaire participants had attended over half of the sessions provided throughout the academic year.

As part of the questionnaire, students were asked why they had attended WoW, with the following six categories being provided as part

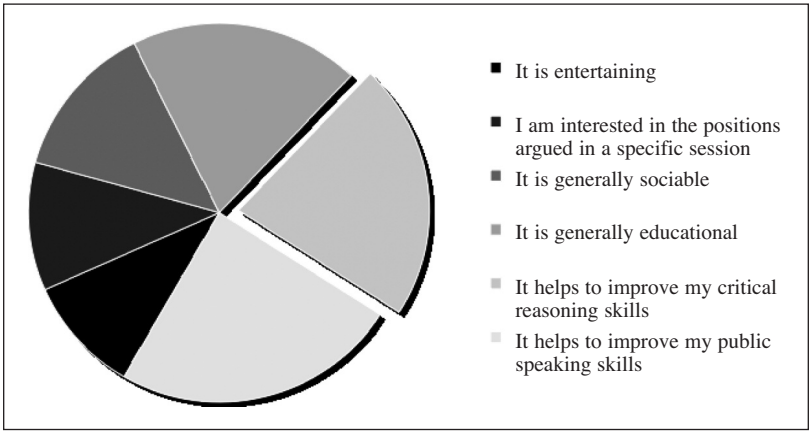

FIGURE 2
Reasons for attendance

of the survey: (a) It is generally educational; (b) I am interested in the positions argued in a specific session; (c) It helps to improve my public speaking skills; (d) It helps to improve my critical reasoning skills; (e) It is entertaining; and (f) It is generally sociable. On a scale of 1-6, with 1 being 'least important' and 6 being 'most important', the participants reported across the range, (by accruing and averaging the scores for each category): It is entertaining – 2.1; I am interested in the positions argued in a specific session – 2.3; It is generally sociable – 2.8; It is generally educational – 4.1; It helps to improve my critical reasoning skills – 4.6; It helps to improve my public speaking skills – 5.1 (rounded figures) = 21. The results are shown in Figure 2.

Participants were also asked to self-reflect on their level of participation and engagement across the sessions they had attended. Of the 187 participants, 32 percent reported that they considered themselves 'highly active', a further 38 percent identified as being 'sometimes active', with 12 percent 'occasionally active'; and a further 18 percent of participants felt that they had been 'passive' during their attendance at sessions.

Participants were asked whether they believed WoW to have had a positive, negative or neutral impact on the following aspects of their university life: (i) academic results, (ii) public speaking, (iii) general self-confidence, (iv) social life, (v) knowledge of current affairs, and (vi) critical reasoning skills. The results are summarised in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Summary of impact on other aspects of University life

Aspect of University life	Positive impact	Neutral impact	Negative impact
Academic results	36%	64%	0%
Public speaking	66%	34%	0%
General self-confidence	62%	38%	0%
Social life	44%	56%	0%
Knowledge of current affairs	72%	28%	0%
Critical reasoning skills	75%	25%	0%

Finally, the participants were asked whether they would appreciate the future inclusion of WoW-style learning and teaching methods into the delivery of their formal degree programmes. The results indicated that

65 percent of the survey's participants stated 'lectures' (within which staff defend pre-set positions); 74 percent stated 'workshops/seminars' (within which students defend pre-set positions); 18 percent declined to answer.

Where participants indicated that they would appreciate the inclusion of WoW-style learning and teaching delivery in their formal degree programmes, the predominant reasons provided by students included the following: 42 percent stated that it 'improves critical reasoning and/or understanding of the subject matter'; 27 percent stated that it 'improves student engagement'; a further 16 percent of participants stated it 'improves self-confidence'; and 15 percent stated it 'improves public speaking skills'.

The particular point of interest within this case study is the significant engagement of BAME students with the WoW ECCA. The proportion of the University's overall student cohort currently stands at approximately 48 percent, whilst the proportion of those participating in WoW is almost twice that figure, at 92 percent. The question is, why? Is there something about the collective Socratic Method style of WoW that appeals to a greater extent to BAME students than their white peers? In the light of the data collected from this case study, the authors would propose that this is indeed the case. Perhaps Mountford-Zimdars *et al*. (2015: 30), are correct in identifying a link between student engagement and the perceived relevance to their own identities: 'academics who had initiated changes in their curricula – introducing new modules or modifying existing ones – observed a link between the engagement of students and their perceptions of relevance to their own experiences and identities'. However, the authors, in this paper, assert that student engagement is increased possibly as a result of a curriculum which recognises and champions the value of a student's individual identity, rather than simply creating hypothetical scenarios designed to be somehow 'relevant' to a student's experiences. In fact, the 'hypothetical scenario' approach has no conclusive beneficial effect towards student engagement, since as Mountford-Zimdars *et al*. (2015: 30) observe: 'there was an awareness that hypothetical cases – including details of names and circumstances – could either draw students in or distance them from the subject matter under discussion'.

Future plans and research

In the light of this student feedback, and following the revalidation of the Law, Criminology and Political Science School's undergraduate portfolio in 2016, the authors have embedded WoW-style teaching as a pilot project within a first year Constitutional and Politics module. This

module is compulsory for all Law degree students as well as those studying on the Politics and International Relations degree, providing a direct comparison between subject-disciplines as part of the next phase of research. The pilot will involve incorporation of the Socratic Method (as outlined in the WoW course) into a series of workshops within which they may ether actively defend or challenge positions based on the critical analysis points of the subject matter. It is the authors' intention to collate the data from these students to discover whether there is a direct correlation between those who allocate themselves to actively defending a WoW position, those who choose to simply challenge these students, and those who perform better in their academic studies.

Alongside this, the authors have worked with academics within other discipline areas so as to embed WoW-style sessions into their curriculum delivery. Whilst some of this is still undertaken on an informal basis, the Hertfordshire Business School has actively followed the Law, Criminology and Political Science School's lead by embedding a WoW-style pilot into their Business and Tourism degree. This will, once again, provide the authors with further subject-discipline comparative data, as well as more detailed information as to whether a similar level of BAME student engagement takes place within these two pilot projects. This, in turn, will enable the authors to explore further whether there is a disproportionate demographic trend towards BAME student involvement in the WoW style of teaching on these undergraduate degrees, as it currently is with the WoW ECCA.

There is a further stage to the future research plan, which is not

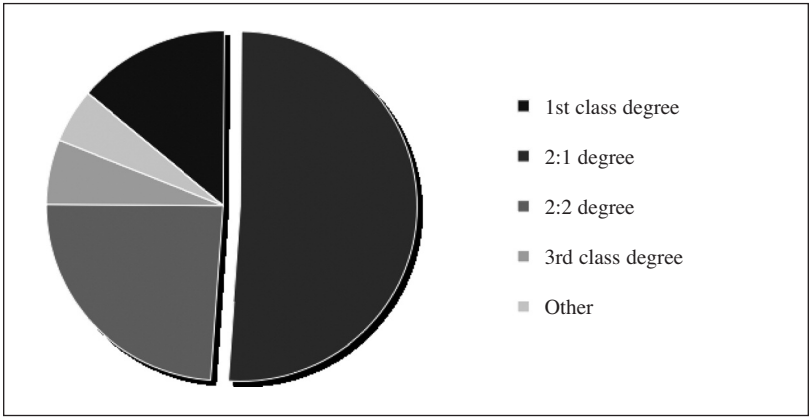

FIGURE 3
Academic performance of the entire cohort

specifically BAME-centric: In the next stage, the authors' plan is to allocate students to WoW-style workshops to identify whether the method works with those who either: (a) do not volunteer to participate; and/or (b) whether there is a correlation between those who do currently volunteer and those who outperform others on the undergraduate academic programmes. In essence, the authors are seeking to identify whether there is something inherent in the WoW-style of teaching that improves performance, or, conversely, whether there is something inherent in the type of student who is amenable to WoW-style teaching.

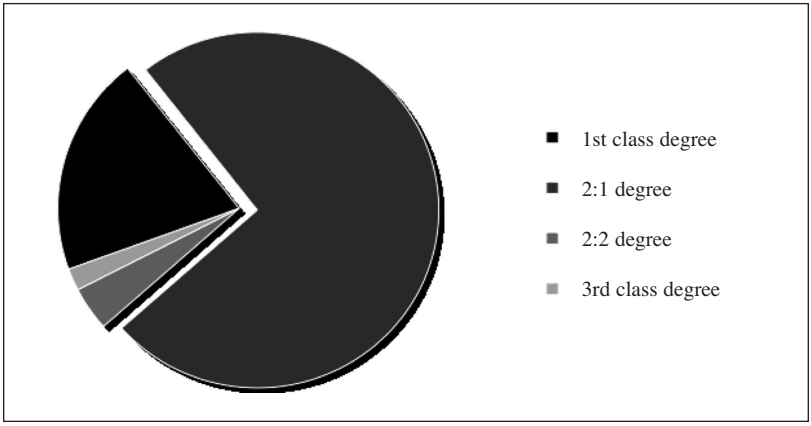

FIGURE 4
Academic performance of the ECCA-engaged cohort

As may be noted from Figure 3, approximately 65 percent of the entire Law, Criminology and Political Science School cohort graduated with a good honours degree (defined as being either a first class honours or upper second class honours degree). A further 23 percent achieved a lower second class honours degree, with a 12 percent either achieving a third class honours degree or another exit award. By comparison Figure 4 illustrates that of those students from the Law, Criminology and Political Science School who were engaged with ECCAs, 94 percent of the student cohort which engaged with ECCAs during their academic studies achieved a good honours degree. Approximately 4 percent achieved a lower second class honours degree, with a further 2 percent receiving a third class honours degree.

Based on this data, the authors assert that there is a direct and positive correlation between exposure to Socratic Method learning and teaching

implemented in ECCAs, and the improved academic performance of students on degree courses. However, the research does not extend to an investigation of the ethnicity of the students within these grade boundaries. This will be focused upon as part of future research.

'Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore"' – conclusions

As noted earlier, teaching standards within the UK's higher education sector are under unprecedented scrutiny not only in terms of 'highly variable' standards of teaching but also in relation to the clear attainment gap between BAME students and their white counterparts within HEIs. While the introduction of the TEF is simply the first step to redressing this situation and one which, the authors assert, the higher education sector would be well advised to respond to in a pro-active and positive manner, it still remains to be seen whether the raising of an HEI's tuition fees will help close the BAME attainment gap. Returning to Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Raven', the message must be understood fully by the sector and acted upon accordingly:

> 'But the Raven still beguiling all my fancy into smiling,
> Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird, and bust and door;
> Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking
> Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore—
> What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore
> Meant in croaking "Nevermore"'

The TEF goes beyond a simple non-reasoning creature that measures quantitative data in the form of QAA outcomes, NSS scores and graduate employability rates. The qualitative element will require institutions to provide a narrative relating to their particular educational missions, extending beyond a focus solely on teaching and learning practice so as to encompass the particular characteristics of their student cohorts and the way in which, as institutions, they are seeking to address the specific needs and requirements of these cohorts. This will, inevitably, require HEIs to comment upon the BAME attainment gap and what they are doing in order to address this imbalance in achievement.

The authors assert that the proper and effective implementation of the classical Socratic Method could provide a viable response to addressing the BAME attainment gap and the TEF's call of 'Nevermore'. WoW has proved to be extremely popular throughout the

2015/16 academic year. Over the course of the twenty sessions the authors have logged around 3,000 attendances from students in all ten of the University's academic schools, with a bias towards law, criminology and political science students due to the fact that the course emanated from that area. However, for the next academic year, the authors intend to promote the course through the University's central systems, including the students' union, halls of residence and Dean of Students office so as to ensure equal exposure to all.

The Socratic Method vs. the traditional style of delivery

The traditional style of curriculum delivery in schools favours rote-learning as opposed to that of critical reasoning. This is borne out in the expectations in the English school's curriculum when compared to the QAA's expectations of a university graduate. Within the school environment, a pupil is expected to 'gain an appreciation' of others' work, whilst at university it is expected to be elevated to a critical appreciation. The way in which this transition is supposed to occur is not made clear, but it is the authors' contention that the 'traditional' method of curriculum delivery within schools carries through, in the main, to university. The reason for this is that many lecturers appear grounded in the need to cover specific subject matter which they, or their institutions, feel their students need to learn and, ultimately, know, as an indication of the success of their degree programmes. The goal is to teach students about X or Y, which has a defensible connection to future employment, as opposed to the development of 'wicked' skills such as critical thinking. This leaves a vacuum, in which students seek instruction and tuition in how to think, not what to think.

WoW provides the participants with the means to think for themselves. There are no 'right' answers, but merely 'good' ones. Within the Socratic Method environment, a student is obliged to go deeper into the issues until *aporia* is reached. This opportunity does not present itself in the traditional one-shot paper-based exam or coursework paper. But why does this type of tuition seem to attract a high proportion of BAME students? The authors have sought to provide an answer through analysis of cultural attitudes to the learning process, with mention given to learning approaches at both a national and international level. However, many of the WoW BAME participants have come through the English school curriculum. Therefore, there may be something viscerally compelling in the Socratic Method which encourages these students to participate. The authors intend to investigate this further in terms of a larger sample size and across three different subject-disciplines (business, law, and politics and international relations).

The questionnaire results indicate that students chose to participate because it was seen as either improving critical reasoning skills or improving public speaking skills, as opposed to simply being regarded as novel or fun. Equally, 82 percent of the participants attended at least four of the twenty available sessions during the 2015/16 academic year which, once again, suggests that novelty is not a factor influencing attendance. Finally, 70 percent of the participants considered themselves to be either 'highly' or 'sometimes' active within these sessions which, the authors suggest, indicates that they do not consider themselves to be passive spectators but rather a part of the collective learning process.

Traditional rote-learning will not make critical thinkers of our graduates and it certainly appears to fail the majority of BAME students at university. By contrast, the Socratic Method not only stimulates the development of critical reasoning amongst students but, from the present case study, appears to lead to enhanced academic performance amongst those who participate and, would appear, to engage a greater proportion of BAME students than their white counterparts. If the UK's higher education sector is to respond to the TEF's call of 'Nevermore' then a return to the forgotten lore of Socratic learning may provide an answer.

Address for correspondence
Dr Dan Berger, School of Social Sciences, University of East London, London, UK. E-mail: d.berger@uel.ac.uk.

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